

“Having now translated the first four books of *Herald of God’s Loving Kindness*, Alexandra Barratt has made an invaluable contribution to studies on Gertrud the Great and the women religious at Helfta. Barratt’s introduction and notes helpfully elucidate the role of liturgy and music especially central in this book of the *Herald*. Her translation achieves the delicate balance between being faithful to the singular charisma of Gertrud of Helfta and being accessible to the contemporary reader.”

—Ella Johnson

Assistant Professor of Systematic Theology

St. Bernard’s School of Theology and Ministry

“Gertrud the Great of Helfta’s *Legatus divinae pietatis* was translated into different European vernaculars from the late Middle Ages onwards, and has been influential ever since. Alexandra Barratt’s lucid and eloquent translation into modern-day English reopens its reception to a general readership, and gives a comprehensive introduction to the historical background and the text’s style. This commendable piece of scholarship provides a crucial base for the study of visionary hagiography in medieval Europe.”

—Racha Kirakosian

Assistant Professor of German

Harvard University

CISTERCIAN FATHERS SERIES: EIGHTY-FIVE

GERTRUD THE GREAT OF HELFTA

THE HERALD OF GOD'S
LOVING-KINDNESS

BOOK FOUR

Translated and Introduced by Alexandra Barratt



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ABBREVIATIONS

CF	Cistercian Fathers series
Conf	Augustine, <i>Confessions</i>
LSG	Mechtild of Hackeborn, <i>Liber Specialis Gratiae</i>
SC	Bernard of Clairvaux, Sermons on the Song of Songs
SCh	Sources chrétiennes. Paris: Éditions du Cerf

INTRODUCTION

Gertrud the Great (1256–1302), to whose name the *Legatus Divinae Pietatis*, or, in English, *The Herald of God’s Loving-Kindness*, is attached, was a German nun at the monastery of Helfta, situated in what is today Saxony-Anhalt, Germany.¹ Helfta was a powerful Benedictine house, Cistercian in its sympathies but not formally part of the Order: it is Saint Benedict whom Gertrud calls “our most holy father” (*Herald* IV.11.1²) and “glorious father Benedict” (IV.50.8), but while she has a special devotion to Bernard because of his writing skills, and his works, or those attributed to him, are quoted on many occasions, she does not otherwise single him out. Under Helfta’s abbess Gertrud of Hackeborn, three of Helfta’s members wrote mystical treatises: Mechtild of Hackeborn, author of the *Liber Specialis Gratiae*;³ Gertrud (distinct from the abbess), source of the

1. On Helfta and its history, see Alexandra Barratt, trans. and annot., *Gertrud the Great of Helfta: The Herald of God’s Loving-Kindness Books One and Two*, CF 35 (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1991), 7–8; Alexandra Barratt and Debra L. Stoudt, “Gertrude the Great of Helfta,” in *Medieval Holy Women in the Christian Tradition c. 1000–c. 1500*, ed. Alastair Minnis and Rosalynn Voaden (Turnhout: Brepols, 2010), 454–55; Josef Hochenauer, *Kloster Helfta: Raum schaffen für das Licht* (Bamberg: St Otto, 1999).

2. References to Book IV are to the present translation; references to Books One and Two are to Barratt, *The Herald: Books One and Two*, and references to Book Three to Alexandra Barratt, trans., *Gertrud the Great of Helfta: The Herald of God’s Loving-Kindness: Book Three*, CF 63 (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1999). References specifically to the Latin *Legatus* (the chapter and paragraph numbers of which are replicated in the translations) are to *Le Héraut*, ed. Pierre Doyère and others, SCH 25, 27, 225, and 331 (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1968–1986).

3. *Revelationes Gertrudianae ac Mechtildiana* II, ed. L. Pacquelin (Paris: Oudin, 1877).

Legatus and possibly of the *Exercitia Spiritualia*;⁴ and Mechtild of Magdebourg, a Beguine who late in life found refuge in the monastery, author of the vernacular *Fliessende Licht der Gottheit*. Gertrud wrote book 2 of *The Herald* “with her own hand” (*Herald*, II.Prol.). A close confidante, now known as “Sister N,”⁵ composed book 1, a biographical memoir. Sister N also recorded, compiled, and edited book 3, a loosely organized collection of revelations received by Gertrud on various occasions and on various topics; book 4, of which the present volume is a modern English translation; and book 5, an account of the deathbeds of various Helfta nuns and other people associated with the community, including Abbess Gertrud and both Mechtilds.

Gertrud’s earthly life was uneventful. Having entered the monastery as a child of four or five, she received an excellent medieval education in the trivium (Latin grammar, rhetoric, and dialectic) and possibly in the quadrivium (arithmetic, music, geometry, and astronomy). Originally indifferent to her vocation, which her family had chosen for her, in 1281 at the age of twenty-five she underwent a conversion and was thenceforward favored with numerous visions and mystical experiences, many of which focused on the heart of Jesus, in which “lie hidden most completely the incomprehensibilities of the divine nature” (IV.2.4). She never held conventual office but was renowned for her teaching, her composition of prayers and spiritual *florilegia*, and her role as spiritual advisor and intermediary with the divine. She was often sick and therefore unable to take her full part

4. *Gertrud the Great of Helfta: Spiritual Exercises*, trans., intro., notes, and indexes by Gertrud Jaron Lewis and Jack Lewis, CF 49 (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1989).

5. See Balázs J. Nemes, “Text Production and Authorship: Gertrude of Helfta’s *Legatus divinae pietatis*,” in Elizabeth Andersen, Henrike Lähnemann, and Anne Simon, eds., *A Companion to Mysticism and Devotion in Northern Germany in the Late Middle Ages* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2014), 116–20; Almuth Märker and Balázs J. Nemes, “*Hunc tercium conscripsi cum maximo labore occultandi*: Schwester N von Helfta und ihre ‘Sonderausgabe’ des ‘*Legatus divinae pietatis*’ Gertruds von Helfta in der Leipziger Handschrift Ms 827,” in *Beiträge zur Geschichte der deutschen Sprache und Literatur* 137 (2015): 248–96.

in the collective life and worship of the community. She died in 1302 in her mid-forties.⁶

Helfta's institutional life, in contrast, was turbulent and reflected the confused political environment in Germany of the second half of the thirteenth century. The monastery fell under an interdict at least once as a consequence of its financial problems. Situated deep in the Holy Roman Empire, it endured endemic uncertainty and surrounding lawlessness: this was a time when the emperor was weak and the local princes, both secular and ecclesiastical, strong. From 1254 to 1273, during Gertrud's formative years, there was actually an interregnum, with no widely accepted emperor; the ineffective Rudolf of Hapsburg held the position from 1273 to 1291, followed by Adolf of Nassau from 1291 until his deposition and death in 1298. Albert I, Rudolf's son, was then elected and was emperor until he too was deposed in 1308.

Structure of Book 4

In contrast to book 3, which has no obvious organizing principle, book 4 has an overt structure, though less artificial and rhetorical than that of book 1. Book 3 had emphasized the role that poor health played in Gertrud's life; book 4 brings together selections ("whatever seemed fitting") from the "spiritual consolations" that Gertrud received on various significant liturgical occasions when she was too sick to take part in the communal observances (IV.Prol.). She may, however, have been present in the monastic church, as we know that when she could not take part in the Office she would sometimes still go there to hear it sung (III.59.1). It is appropriate, therefore, that these "consolations" should be arranged largely in chronological order, according to the church's year. Most of the occasions on which they were experienced are major feasts of the church, saints' days, or particular Sundays identified by their respective introits, but some

6. The meager information that we possess about Gertrud's life is derived from *The Herald* itself. See further Barratt, *The Herald: Books One and Two*, 9–12; Barratt, *The Herald: Book Three*, 9–11.

of the revelations occur on weekdays related to important feasts, such as the Wednesday of Holy Week and the Monday and Tuesday following Pentecost.

Book 4 begins on December 23 (the day before the vigil of the Nativity of Our Lord), and the chapters then proceed in chronological order up to chapter 56 (Saint Elizabeth of Hungary, November 17). But chapter 57 records revelations communicated on August 28, the feast of Saint Augustine of Hippo, although they concern Saint Catherine of Alexandria, whose feast fell on November 25 in the Middle Ages. Chapter 58 takes place on the feast of the Dedication of the Church, the date of which is unknown if it refers to the monastic church, though it might refer to the feast of the Dedication of the Lateran basilica, which fell on November 9. The final chapter opens with an apparition of the Lord on the occasion of the consecration of the chapel; the year in which this took place is unknown, but we know from III.17.1 that the date was August 10, as it coincided with the feast of Saint Laurence. It is possible, then, to see the last two chapters as appendices, outside the framework of the rest of the book.

If revelations relating to a festival were received on more than one occasion, they are all gathered under the same date. IV.48, for instance, records four separate sets of revelations delivered on feasts of the Assumption in different years. In addition, revelations concerning some saints are granted on the feasts of others, so we have Saints Francis, Augustine, and Dominic associated with the feast of Saint Bernard, and further revelations concerning Saint Agnes communicated on the feast of Saint Augustine. In all, the compiler of book 4 shows a commendable ability to collate, control, and organize a large body of material that she must have acquired piecemeal and cumulatively over an extended period of time.

“Sister N”

Gertrud’s anonymous editor, the hypothetical “Sister N,” who later refers to herself as “the compiler of this book,” is a noticeable presence in book 4. Not only does she organize this mass of disparate material,

but if necessary she annotates it. For instance, at IV.26.2 she provides a learned comment on modes of perception in mystical visions, with and without the aid of corporeal images, and the possible role played by angels, which includes a long quotation taken from Bernard of Clairvaux's sermons on the Song of Songs. This she probably quoted from memory, and she has adapted it to her own purposes. She also takes a role in trimming her material and then apologizing to the reader for doing so: there is much more that she could have recorded, but she does not wish to weary us, she explains. At Easter Gertrud receives very many spiritual insights that, Sister N states, "could greatly delight the soul of the devout reader; I am, however, omitting them all, and very many others too, for the sake of brevity, lest prolixity should engender distaste" (IV.27.5). Later, on the feast of the Dedication of the Church, she describes Gertrud anticipating the divine promise that "she would experience wonderful delight in spirit, of which much could be said that I have omitted in the interests of brevity" (IV.59.3).

Sister N therefore adopts the role of a privileged intermediary who grants or refuses access to Gertrud's experiences. As Balázs Nemes says, she "is guided by two main principles: readability in her arrangement of her material, and usefulness in its content."⁷ For instance, just before the feast of the Ascension, Christ revealed himself to Gertrud "in the serenity of such great goodness and kindness as cannot be expressed by any words, nor can it be grasped by human senses." Sister N immediately interposes to say, "But nonetheless let me say a few words, selected from many" (IV.35.2–3). Needless to say, the selection is hers: indeed, the whole of book 4, as she states in the Prologue, is Sister N's choice of "whatever seemed fitting."

Sister N's prose style is quite distinctive, and different from that of Gertrud. Although learned and correct, it is somewhat labored and not as fluent as Gertrud's as it appears in book 2. For some reason she prefers the imperfect (past continuous) tense to the perfect, even when she is describing a single rather than continuous action. In her

7. Nemes, "Text Production," 117.

choice of vocabulary, she sometimes repeats the same word, or with minor variations, several times in close proximity, where a modern reader would consider it awkward. At other times she seems intent on using a series of different words for what is essentially the same idea. Sometimes her choice of words is rare or obscure. Sister N also is both cautious and punctilious in conveying what Gertrud had told her and tries to avoid making baldly unqualified statements. For instance, she is always reluctant to state that Gertrud “saw” something and prefers to use more ambiguous expressions such as “it seemed to her” (the translation has not always preserved this feature, which can be irritating *in extenso*). And she likes to nuance her account of Gertrud’s visions by using similes (introduced by “as if”) rather than direct description and then sometimes further modifying them by phrases such as “as it were.” The translation has mainly followed her in most of these stylistic decisions.

The Role of the Liturgy and of Music

Almost everyone who comments on Gertrud singles out the strongly liturgical basis of her spirituality.⁸ Perhaps because book 4 focuses on the feasts and services of the church, the liturgy and liturgical texts are even more prominent here than in the other books of the *Legatus*. The text reveals how highly the community valued the liturgy and its proper performance. For instance, we are told how on one occasion, when the various liturgical duties for the week were allocated, there was some gentle competition among the nuns for the privilege of chanting “this or that responsory” and genuine disappointment among those who missed out (IV.2.12).

Many of the individual chapters are structured around the proper chants for the relevant feasts, with which Gertrud’s revelations are often inextricably intertwined. Heavenly figures—Christ, the Virgin, or the saints—may join in or respond to the liturgy (e.g., IV.3.3 and 6;

8. See, for instance, Doyère, *Gertrude d’Helfta*, 52–54.

IV.12.5), and the choir of the monastic church at Helfta becomes just one part of a continuum that extends from the divine itself, through the citizens of heaven, down to the nuns on earth. It always includes Gertrud, who may be absent from choir but reciting her Office in the infirmary, on her own (sometimes in bed, IV.9.2), or with another sick nun (IV.35.2). Or the chants combine with the events of the feast they commemorate: on the feast of the Purification, for instance, the words of the chant merge with a vision of the Virgin, “sitting in glory with her son, the King of Kings,” then of the presentation in the temple as recounted in Luke’s gospel, then back to the Virgin, who orders the angelic hosts to guard the nuns present in choir as representing all those who “wholeheartedly desire that true religion should be perpetually preserved and increased in this place and everywhere” (IV.9.3–6). Sometimes the verses are directly related to a particular spiritual insight achieved by Gertrud (e.g., IV.3.7); in others, the chants function as mnemonic devices enabling the visionary to recall and transmit her experiences in great detail (in IV.2.1–3 and IV.9.1 the Matins bell performs this function).

Sometimes heavenly figures take part in a kind of sacred ballet in response to the Office: on one feast of the Assumption Gertrud sees the court of heaven rejoice together “with a wonderful dance of jubilation,” bursting out in the Virgin’s praise with the words of a response (IV.48.22); during Vespers on Trinity Sunday, the Father and Son both speak and honor the Virgin, while the community chants the psalms, with varying degrees of devotion (IV.41.1–3). During first Vespers for the feast of the Assumption, the Helfta choir becomes the stage for a divine oratorio, with the angels joining in a response with the community “in the joyous shout of heavenly delights,” the Son intoning “in a deep voice” the opening of another chant, the Holy Spirit playing “the lyre of his divine heart,” and the Virgin rising to extend her protection to the faithful (IV.48.8). Another year on the same feast, the Virgin is enthroned while the two choirs of angels and saints sing the chants alternately, joined by the Holy Spirit, the Son, and the Father in turn: at the climax the Virgin herself joins in

the singing of the *Te Deum* in praise of the Trinity (IV.48.9–13). As a revelation's content may be directly related to or inspired by the wording of chants used in the Office or Mass of the day, if Gertrud's amanuensis has provided only the first few words, the translation provides the full text of the chant for clarification (e.g., IV.9.3).

No discussion of the importance of the liturgy can ignore the enhanced role of music and musical imagery in book 4.⁹ Gertrud loved music, to a fault, in her opinion. On Trinity Sunday the Lord chides her for this indulgence, explaining: "Weighed in the balance of justice, you have been deprived of inner delight of spiritual understanding because in yielding to your own will, you took human pleasure in the harmonious sound of the chant" (IV.41.5; see III.30.26).

In Gertrud's world, the inhabitants of heaven sing the liturgy alongside the religious on earth. On the feast of the Dedication of the Church, Gertrud witnesses the Father and the Son singing an unaccompanied vocal duet, the earliest examples of which appeared in the thirteenth century.¹⁰ The Father sings the response at Matins in the treble while the Son takes the bass, singing "in the role of his human nature," and provides a kind of verbal counterpoint or faux-bourdon:

The Son of God inserted one by one those words that the heart stricken with compunction ponders, that is: "Ah, alas! wretch that I am, how have I wasted time in ignoring the Lord God my lover," and the like. And the Son of God, in the role of his human nature, chanted this in deep tones, as if singing a sweet-sounding duet with God the Father, who was chanting most excellently through the music of the divine nature or in the treble, "*Behold the tabernacle of God with men.*" (IV.58.7)

9. Naoë Kukita Yoshikawa has recently highlighted the therapeutic use of music and the role of musical imagery in the LSG; see "Heavenly Vision and Psychosomatic Healing: Medical Discourse in Mechtild of Hackeborn's *The Booke of Gostlye Grace*," in *Medicine, Religion and Gender in Medieval Culture*, edited by Naoë Kukita Yoshikawa (Woodbridge, Suffolk: D. S. Brewer, 2015), 67–84.

10. Alison Latham, ed., *Oxford Companion to Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), s.v. *duet*.

Another time the Virgin Mary sings a solo when she joins in the celebration of her assumption and is serenaded by a choir of flowers: “all the flowers sent out from each and every petal . . . a bright and joyful sound, as if one could hear all the world’s musicians chanting sweetest melody together. Then the blessed Virgin, as if exulting in her unmatched blessedness . . . , sang, “I shall greatly rejoice in the Lord” (IV.48.10).

Instrumental music is even more prominent in Gertrud’s imaginary world than vocal music, and various musical instruments, both generic and specific, regularly appear in her visions, especially as metaphors and similes. On the feast of the Annunciation, Gertrud’s soul receives a necklace with seven points, each of which symbolizes a virtue. Although this necklace is hard for the reader to visualize, in some way it becomes a musical instrument played by the Holy Spirit: “While the antiphon ‘By wonderful skill’ was being chanted at Terce, the Holy Spirit seemed to blow from the Lord’s heart like a most gentle south wind. Sweetly playing with his most delightful breath on the seven jewels of that necklace that her soul was wearing before him as if they were a musical instrument, he was chanting that antiphon in praise of the highest Trinity” (IV.12.7).

Another time, while Gertrud is repeating a prayer over and over again, she sees that “each little verse was . . . being presented to the Lord in the form of some melodious musical instrument that pleased the Lord, and was praising and playing before him just as minstrels are accustomed to play at the banquet of nobles” (IV.35.10). Musical instruments occur in another simile when Gertrud apologizes to Saint Elizabeth of Hungary for concentrating her devotion on God rather than on the saint. Saint Elizabeth reassures her that “by this you soothe my state of mind the more sweetly just as a musical instrument pleases someone more than the bleating of sheep or lowing of cattle” (IV.56.1).

In these examples the phrase translated as “musical instrument” (*musicum instrumentum*) is generic. A more precise term, which in book 4 occurs only in chapter 41, is *cithara*. Used as a representation or manifestation of the divine Heart, this musical instrument apparently

has three strings—very common in medieval stringed instruments—is resonant, and sounds in the upper register. On Trinity Sunday,

while they were intoning Vespers, the Son of God, holding in both hands his most kind and worthy heart, was presenting it to the sight of the glorious Trinity in the form of a stringed instrument. . . . Those who were concentrating on singing the praise of the worshipful Trinity with devotion were sounding through the most holy heart of Jesus as if in the higher register with a clear tone and most delightful sound. (IV.41.2; see III.26.3, and *Spiritual Exercises* 6, lines 425–26)

Later on the same feast, “the whole Trinity . . . was bending with most kindly condescension towards the heart of Jesus, which in the form of a stringed instrument was playing wonderfully and sounding sweetly. . . . On it <the Trinity> put three strings that should unceasingly, in accordance with the insuperable omnipotence of God the Father and the wisdom of God the Son and the benevolence of the Holy Spirit, make good every failing of hers to the pleasure of the most blessed Trinity” (IV.41.4).

Although *cithara* can mean both “harp” and “lute,” this translation has chosen the generic “stringed instrument,” as it is not clear exactly what Gertrud has in mind. As the verb used to describe the process of playing the *cithara* is *circumvolvere*, “to turn,” it is probable that she was thinking of the *organistrum*. This stringed instrument consisted of a sound box with strings stopped by a keyboard attached to the cover and sounded by a roisined wheel operated by a handle.¹¹ But the organistrum is now obsolete, so the term would convey nothing to modern readers, while the alternative word that still survives, “hurdy-gurdy,” would have the wrong associations, as it has gone down in the world and tends to be associated with “itinerant musicians, peasants, and blind beggars.”¹²

11. Hortense Panum, *The Stringed Instruments of the Middle Ages: Their Evolution and Development*, trans. Jeffrey Pulver (London: William Reeves, 1939), 292–93.

12. Latham, *Oxford Companion to Music*, s.v. hurdy-gurdy.

THE HERALD OF GOD'S LOVING-KINDNESS

PROLOGUE

Since one should be particularly attentive to strenuous devotion on feast days, for the benefit of anyone who therefore wishes to find material, in this one place has been arranged whatever seemed fitting from those spiritual consolations with which the Lord visited <Gertrud>¹ on all the feasts during the year when, her strength failing, she could not follow the convent in the strict observance of the Order.

1. The Latin text never refers to Gertrud by name (apart from using the genitive form, *Drudis*, in the title of *Legatus* IV.17), but uses *ista*, *illa*, or *ea*. The proper name has been provided when necessary to avoid ambiguity.

CHAPTER ONE

PREPARATION FOR THE BIRTH OF CHRIST

1. On the night before the vigil of the most holy Nativity of the Lord she had spent a long unsleeping hour before Matins and had taken much pleasure in turning over the words of that response, “From that hidden habitation <of his, the Son of God shall go forth>.”¹ She realized that the Lord Jesus was reclining very peacefully *in the bosom of God the Father** with most sweet tranquility. Like a cloud of incense, the desires of all those intent on devoutly celebrating the coming feast were directed toward him. The Lord Jesus, beautiful and delicate, was sending out wonderful splendor from his divine heart toward all those clouds of incense; this splendor was preparing a path for them to come to him. By this she perceived that when each woman approached the Lord, those who had humbly entrusted themselves to the prayers of others were hastening toward the Lord unerringly on the direct path, in the splendor of his divine heart, as if carried by the

*John 1:18

1. *De illa occulta habitatione sua egressus est filius dei; descendit visitare et consolari omnes qui eum de toto corde desiderabant*; “From that hidden habitation of his, the Son of God shall go forth; he has come down to visit and console all those who long for him with all their heart”; response for the Office of 23 December.

hands of those leading them and supported on each side. But those who were attempting to celebrate the feast devoutly by relying on their own efforts and prayers were hindered by losing their way, sometimes stepping off the path, but sometimes they returned to the path and approached God in the light divinely provided for them.

2. And when she was longing to know how the divine loving-kindness condescended to bend down to each one, she realized that they had all suddenly been carried to the very couch of the Father's sweetness, to the Son of God, and each was delighting in him in proportion to her desire and capacity. Nor could one be hindered by another, but each was enjoying God fully, in proportion to her desire, as if offering herself to God himself alone. For some were embracing him as a tender little child made flesh for us; others were treating him as a most faithful friend to whom they could reveal with the greatest confidence all the secrets of their hearts. Still others were caressing him as a radiant spouse *chosen out of a thousand thousand*,* according to every delight of their heart. And in this way each was allowed happily to take pleasure in him in proportion to her love.

*see
Song 5:10

3. Then approaching him *she fell down at the feet of her Lord** in her usual way, saying, "And now, my most loving Lord, what preparation can be mine, or what can I show by way of service to your most blessed mother on that feast of her most holy childbirth? For I even fail to perform her Hours, to which I am bound by the vows of religion, not only from physical weakness but, alas, by my own neglect." Then the kindly Lord, taking pity on her poverty, seemed tenderly to offer every word that she had spoken during Advent to the praise of God and the profit of souls,* either in teaching or in helping someone, to his sweetest mother, sitting by him in wonderful glory. He did this in recompense

*see
Mark 7:25

*see RB 58

for all the ways in which <Gertrud> had neglected to reverence her with due honors and services, with all the fruit that could result from the same words from one person to another, until the end of the world. The mother of the Lord received this offering with the greatest pleasure and seemed made wonderfully beautiful by it. Approaching her in a spirit of devotion, <Gertrud> was begging her that she would deign to pray for her to her only son. Immediately, serene in her motherly gentleness, she bent down to her and then, caressing her only child with lovely embraces and kisses, prayed for her with these words, saying, "May your love, my dearly beloved son, united with mine, be favorably disposed toward the most powerful prayers of this your lover." After this, caressing her beloved, <Gertrud> addressed him with these words: "O sweetness of my soul, Jesus most loving and most desiring, of all precious things the most precious!"

4. And when she had repeated these and other similar expressions of love, she asked the Lord, "What fruit can these words bear, what feeble little efforts can my worthlessness bring about?" The Lord replied, "What difference does it make what sort of chest encases spices, or what boxes an unguent, since when they are stirred they breathe out the same scent? In the same way, when anyone says to me, 'Sweetest, most loving,' and so on, even though the one who speaks thinks himself unworthy through his own worthlessness, nonetheless the intrinsic sweetness of my divinity is stirred in its very depths and breathes out to me fragrance of wonderful delight. It also wafts the scent of eternal salvation toward the very person who prompted my sweetness with such words."

CHAPTER FOUR

SAINT JOHN APOSTLE AND EVANGELIST¹

1. While she was praying one day in Advent, John the Evangelist and Apostle appeared to her dressed in yellow garments woven all over with golden eagles. This symbolized that however much he was raised above himself through ecstasy in contemplation while still living in the body, nonetheless he always strove to sink down into the valley of humility through acknowledgment of his own worthlessness. And while she was examining the pattern more carefully, she saw a rosy color appear beneath those golden eagles, which radiated a little on every side around the eagles. This symbolized that Saint John was eager to begin the course of his contemplation from mindfulness of the Lord's passion, which he had indeed seen with his own eyes and had pondered in the depths of his heart through intimate compassion. And thus, progressing little by little, he flew as far as the height of divine majesty and contemplated the sun's orb itself more closely with his mind's unaverted gaze.²

He also had two golden lilies, one on his right shoulder and one on his left, and on the right was written in

1. On this chapter, see Hamburger, *St. John the Divine*, 179–83.

2. Traditionally, the mystic begins with the contemplation of Christ's humanity in his passion and ascends in due course to the contemplation of the divine.

*John 13:23
and 21:7

wonderful writing, “The disciple *whom Jesus loved*.”*
On the left it said: “This man was the Virgin’s protector,”³ because of the distinctive nature of those special privileges by which he alone, above the other apostles, deserved to be, and be called, the disciple whom Jesus loved and because, as he was about to die on the cross, the Lord judged that he should be entrusted with his lily, that is, his virginal mother.*

*see
John 19:27

2. He also had on his breast a wonderful breastplate⁴ because of that privilege that allowed him to recline on the Lord Jesus’ breast, flowing with honey, at the Last Supper. On this was written, “In the beginning was the Word,”* to symbolize the lively strength of those most worthy words that are contained in this gospel. Then she said to the Lord, “Why, most loving Lord, have you set before me, unworthy as I am, this beloved of yours?” The Lord replied, “For this reason: that I may join him to you in special friendship, and, since you do not have an apostle, I am assigning you this one. He will be your most faithful patron before me in heaven.” And she said, “Teach me, sweetest, what service I may show him.” The Lord replied, “Anyone at all could say an Our Father daily for their

*John 1:1

3. *Iste custos virginis*, from the sequence “*Verbum Dei, Deo natum*”; see Esth 2:15. On the sequence, “which was once attributed to Adam of St Victor but is now considered of later, Dominican origin” (Hamburger, *St. John*, 105), see Hamburger, *St. John*, 180 and 181, and for the Latin and German texts, Erika Lauren Lindgren, *Sensual Encounters: Monastic Women and Spirituality in Medieval Germany* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 163–65.

4. *rationale*: either “an episcopal humeral, a counterpart of the *pallium*, and like it worn over the *chasuble*,” or “an episcopal ornament similar to a large pectoral clasp, made of precious metal, ornamented with diamonds, and worn over the *chasuble*,” both worn in the Middle Ages by various German bishops (*Catholic Encyclopedia*, s.v.).

guardian apostle, bringing to mind that sweet faithfulness that his heart carefully pondered when I was teaching <the apostles> that very prayer, and pray that they might be granted the privilege of deserving to follow me faithfully to the end of their life, by steadfast perseverance.”

3. Now during Matins on the feast of the same apostle,⁵ while she was devoutly concentrating in her usual fashion, the beloved disciple whom Jesus loved* (and who for that reason should also deserve to be loved by all lovers) came to her, caressing her in many ways. When she had faithfully commended to him very many of the community entrusted to her, he had gently accepted the prayers of them all, saying, “I am like my Lord in this, that *I love them that love me.*”^{*} She said to him, “And what grace could a little thing like me receive on this sweet feast of yours?” He replied, “Come with me, chosen of my Lord, and let us rest together on the Lord’s breast, flowing with sweetness, in which lie hidden treasures of perfect blessedness.” And catching her up he took her with him to the presence, flowing with honey, of the Lord the Savior and put her on the right, and he himself turned aside to the left, to rest. And when both were leaning on the bosom of the Lord Jesus, Saint John, touching the Lord’s breast with his forefinger with most reverent gentleness, said, “Look, this is the Holy of Holies, drawing to itself all goodness of heaven and earth.”

4. Then she asked Saint John why he had placed her on the right, himself choosing the left side of the Lord’s breast. He answered her, “Because I have already subdued all things and, *having become one spirit with God,*^{*} I am able to enter him subtly where the flesh cannot reach. Therefore I have chosen the inviolate <part of

*John 13:23

*Prov 8:17

*see
1 Cor 6:17

Christ's body>, but since you are still living in the body, you cannot follow by entering the more inviolate parts as I do. Therefore I have placed you at the opening of the divine heart, so that from there you could draw the more freely draughts of sweetness and consolation, which the bubbling force of divine love generously pours out unceasingly to all those who desire it."

Affected with indescribable pleasure by the motion of the heartbeats that constantly stimulated the divine heart, she said to Saint John, "Did not you too, beloved of God, sense the pleasure of these most delightful heartbeats when you *leaned on that most wonderful breast* at the Last Supper?" He replied, "Yes, I did, and I declare I have truly perceived, and perceived plainly, that their delight has pierced my soul to its inmost being, just as very sweet mead can always make a fresh wheaten loaf sweeter by soaking it.⁶ In addition, my spirit too has also vigorously caught fire from those <heartbeats>, just as cooking oil can catch fire the more furiously from the flames' great heat." Then she said, "Why have you kept such profound silence about this and written nothing or, at least, very little that we could profitably understand?" He replied, "Truly it was my part to write for the infant church a single word about the uncreated Word of God the Father, a word on which the understanding of the whole human race could feed until the end of the world, although no one can ever completely grasp it. But the preaching of the delight of these heartbeats was kept for the present time, so that the world, now growing old and sluggish in the love of God, may grow warm again from hearing of such things."

6. See *Legatus* V.33.1, where Christ promises to infuse Gertrud's book with the sweetness of his divinity, "just as sweetest mead strongly infuses a piece of fresh white bread."

5. And while she was admiring the comeliness of Saint John, who appeared lying on the Lord's breast, he responded to her, "Up until now I have appeared to you only in this form in which on earth I leaned on the breast of the Lord, my lover and only beloved, at the Last Supper. But now, if you wish, I shall win for you to be allowed to look upon me in the form in which I now enjoy the pleasures of the Godhead in heaven." And while she longed to win this, she immediately saw the vast sea of the Godhead within Jesus' breast and in it Saint John, in the form of a delicate little bee,⁷ swimming like a little fish in indescribable delight and freedom. And she perceived that the Godhead would inhabit more often the place⁸ where its force flows most powerfully into the human nature <of Christ>. Having drunk most thirstily and become intoxicated by most delightful torrents, he seemed to put forth from his heart something like a proboscis,⁹ and from that to sprinkle throughout the compass of the whole world drops of divine delight, which were the most salutary admonitions of his teaching of salvation, and especially of the gospel, *In the beginning was the Word*.*

*John 1:1

6. Again, at the same feast on another occasion she was taking much pleasure in hearing extolled so often

7. In the medieval bestiary bees were described as (like Saint John) peculiarly chaste: the bees' "origin is shared, as is the purity of their virgin bodies, and their birth is shared, since they do not take part in sexual intercourse, nor are they torn by the pangs of birth" (Richard Barber, *The Bestiary* [Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1999], 178).

8. That is, the divine heart.

9. *quasi venam*: I have followed the French translator, who argues that Gertrud is continuing the metaphor of the bee, but other meanings of *vena* could be appropriate here, such as "(water) pipe" and "vein."

on that day in ambrosial words the virginal integrity in blessed John. Finally, having turned to that special friend of God, she prayed that by his prayers he might deign to win for us, insofar as with the help of God's grace we were assiduous in such careful guarding of chastity, that in the life eternal, in God's glory, we might also in our own measure share the proclamations of such sweet-sounding praises with him. At this she received this reply from Saint John: "If anyone longs to share with me in blessedness the prize of victory, let him be assiduous in keeping to my way of running the race."* And he added, "Throughout my entire life, I recalled quite often with what sweet and intimate friendship Jesus, my most loving master and Lord, had looked on me. Or rather, he rewarded me with that continence that enabled me to abandon my bride and follow him away from the wedding.¹⁰ Afterward I always manifested, in all my words and deeds, this eagerness to take greater care lest I might furnish an opportunity, either in myself or in others, to sully in any way that virtue that my master welcomes: chastity."

*see
1 Cor 9:24

7. And he added, "For the other apostles were in every respect wary of what was suspect but allowed more freely what was not suspect: as we read in Acts, 'They were *with the women and Mary, mother of Jesus*,'* and so on. But I always conducted myself warily among them so that when some bodily necessity or the salvation of a soul demanded it, I was never seen to flee the sex, but neither did I ever omit to show caution in guarding chastity. For it was my custom, whenever any

*Acts 1:14

10. Saint John traditionally "had thought of marrying but instead was called by the Lord" (*Golden Legend*, trans. Ryan, 1:50).

opportunity of human kindness presented itself, always to call upon the aid of the divine loving-kindness. And this is what is sung of me: *In affliction have you called upon me, and I have heard you,** for the Lord never allowed anyone to be sullied in any way at all by love for me. As a result I received this too as a reward from my most beloved master, that chastity is praised in me more than in all the other chosen. And this is not all: I have also received a place in heaven pre-eminent in special dignity, where sitting in glory and resplendent brightness I receive more directly, with sweet delight, the rays of that love that *is the unspotted mirror and brightness of eternal light.** For as often as the church commemorates my chastity in any text, the Lord himself, my lover, greets me with a most delicately tender gesture and fills all my inner parts with an indescribably sweet joy so that a most potent drink penetrates all the innermost recesses of my soul. And this is why they sing in my praise, ‘I shall place you as a seal in my sight,’¹¹ that is, like a vessel to catch all the emissions of my most burning—or rather, most delightful—love.”

*Ps 80:8

*Wis 7:26

8. After this, led to higher knowledge, she understood that, according to what the Lord said in the gospel, “*In my father’s house there are many dwelling places,*”^{*} there were in particular three dwelling places in which in a threefold way followers of the integrity of virginal modesty enjoy blessedness. The first dwelling place belongs to those who, as was said before of the apostles, completely flee anything suspect and allow within reason what is not suspect. And if anything has assaulted their mind with temptation, they struggle courageously to defeat it. But if at times they succumb a little from

*John 14:2

11. Ninth response for Matins of the feast of Saint John; see Hag 2:24.

human weakness, they expunge this with *worthy fruits of penance*.*

*see Luke 3:8

The second dwelling place belongs to those who act quite cautiously both in what is not suspect and in what is, and who completely distance themselves from everything that could be an opportunity for temptation. They *chastise their body and bring it into subjection*,* so much so that it is impossible for it to rebel against the spirit. Among their number we see blessed John the Baptist and other spiritual men, who are all made happy in that second dwelling place, both because God's loving-kindness has freely sanctified them and because they themselves particularly cooperated with God's grace by withdrawing from evil and exerting themselves in good.

*1 Cor 9:27

The third dwelling place belongs to those who, *preceded by the Lord in the blessings of sweetness*,* abhor all evil as if innately; however, among various accidents they sometimes have dealings with the wicked and sometimes with the good, for various reasons. But nonetheless *hating evil and cleaving to the good** with immutable purpose, they are eager to keep both themselves and others unsullied. And since human affection is always present, sometimes such people profit wonderfully from it when, fearing the disturbance of that same love, they are brought low and thence alerted more carefully to their own protection. As Gregory says, "It is the mark of virtuous minds to admit a fault where there is no fault."¹² Among these, blessed John the Evangelist gained the privilege of principal victory. Thence on his feast is chanted, "He who has overcome, I shall make him," that is, "He who has overcome (that is, human affection), I shall make him a pillar in my temple, that

*Ps 20:4

*Rom 12:9

12. Gregory the Great, Epistles XI.64, PL 77:1195B.

is, like a strong vessel on which I may rest to support the overflow of divine delight. And I shall write my name above him, that is, I shall clearly imprint on him the pleasure of my divine intimacy and the name of the new city of Jerusalem,¹³ that is, both inwardly and outwardly he shall receive a unique reward for each individual whose salvation he sought on earth.”

9. This agrees with another occasion, on which she was considering why blessed John the Evangelist was so greatly praised for his virginal integrity, since we read that he was called from his wedding by the Lord, while blessed John the Baptist, completely untouched by any carnality, is less praised for such a virtue. The Lord, who is *the discerner of thoughts** and distributor of rewards, showed her both in a vision. The Baptist was sitting on a throne raised up and completely removed from everything, above the sea. But the Evangelist was seen standing in the middle of a path that was burning so terrifyingly that the flame completely engulfed him above, below, and around. When she saw this and was wondering at it, the Lord instructed her, saying: “Which seems to you more praiseworthy, that the Evangelist is not on fire, or that the Baptist is not burnt up?” From this she realized that the rewards for virtue that is attacked and for virtue that is preserved in peace are very different.

*Heb 4:12

10. Similarly, when at night she was constant in prayer and struggling to draw near the Lord with special devotion, she saw blessed John leaning on him, holding him tight with sweetest embraces and sweetly caressing

13. A much elaborated version of *Qui vicerit, faciam illum columnam meam in templo meo, dicit dominus; et scribam super eum nomen meum et nomen civitatis novae Jerusalem*; fifth response at Matins of the feast of Saint John; see Rev 3:12.

him in various ways. Then she humbly flung herself at the Lord's feet so that she might mourn her own shortcomings. Blessed John, gently speaking to her, said, "Do not flee my company! Here is the neck that is sufficient for the embrace of a thousand thousand lovers, and the mouth that offers sweetness to the kisses of many, and the ears that keep secrets safe from the whispers of all." Now during Matins, while "Mother, behold your son"¹⁴ was being sung, she saw a wonderful splendor coming forth from the heart of God over blessed John, which prompted the gaze of all the saints toward him with reverent wonder. The blessed Virgin was also seen to caress him with particular alacrity, since she was called his mother. Thence also that chosen disciple, moved by a special caress of sweet love, greeted her in return. Similarly, when the individual privileges of the special friendship bestowed on him by the Lord were being recited, that is, "This is John who lay on the Lord's breast at the Last Supper. This is the disciple who was worthy to be among the secrets of heaven."¹⁵ This is the disciple whom Jesus loved,"¹⁶ and so on, the glory of a splendor, new but ever the same, was made manifest to all the saints. And from this all the saints were prompted to the praise of God by the indescribable joy of so beloved a disciple. And in this blessed John experienced wonderful delight.

14. *Mulier, ecce filius tuus; ad discipulum autem, ecce mater tua*; verse at Matins of the feast of Saint John; see John 19:26.

15. *Iste est Joannes qui supra pectus domini in cena recubuit, beatus apostolus cui revelata sunt secreta caelestia*; response at Matins of the feast of Saint John; see John 13:25.

16. *Iste est Joannes qui supra pectus domini in cena recubuit quem diligebat Jesus*; antiphon at Vespers of the feast of Saint John; see John 13:23 and 21:7.

11. At that sentence “<The Lord Jesus Christ> appeared to his beloved <John with his disciples>,”¹⁷ and so on, she perceived that the form in which the Lord visited John renewed in him all the sweetness of the shared intimacy that ever he had experienced all his life. As a result blessed John, as if transformed into another man, tasted in advance to a degree the delights of eternal banquets,¹⁸ in three things especially for which he gave thanks at his death. Of the first he said, “I have seen your face and I am awakened as if from the tomb.” Of the second, “Your perfume, Lord Jesus, has awakened longing in me.” Of the third, “Your voice is full of sweetness flowing like honey, <and your speech is incomparable>.”¹⁹ For from the power of his sweetest presence he had received, as it were, a certain quickening of immortality, and from the power of the divine calling, hope of sweetest consolation, and from the gentleness of his words, the enjoyment of highest delight.

12. Hearing it read that rising up at the Lord’s call he began to go,²⁰ as if wishing to follow the Lord on foot to heaven, she perceived that blessed John had so

17. *Apparuit caro suo Ioanni Dominus Iesus Christus cum discipulis suis, et ait illi: Veni, dilecte meus, ad me, quia tempus est ut epuleris in convivio meo cum fratribus tuis*; “The Lord Jesus Christ appeared to his beloved John with his disciples and said to him: Come to me, my beloved, for it is time for you to feast at my banquet with your brethren”; antiphon at Matins of the feast of Saint John.

18. See previous note.

19. *Vidi faciem tuam, et quasi de sepultura susciturus sum. Odor tuus concupiscentias in me excitavit eternas. Vox tua plena suavitate melliflua, et allocutio tua incomparabilis*; fifth lection at Matins of the feast of Saint John, derived from Odericus Vitalis, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, I:2.11; PL 188:153.

20. *Surgens autem Johannes cepit ire*; opening of the fifth lection.

great and so firm a trust in the most loving goodness of his Lord and master that he thought <John> worthy to be taken up into heaven without the pain of death.²¹ And because he had foreseen this in the daring of love, he immediately deserved to receive it. Then she began to be astonished, because books say that John passed over without the pain of death because he suffered in his mind beside the cross and also because of the incorruption of his flesh. Now she perceived that John had obtained this because of his trust. To this the Lord replied, "For the integrity of his virginity and for his compassion for my death I have rewarded my beloved with pre-excellent glory in eternal life. But as for that confident trust that led him to assume that I could refuse him nothing out of the superabundance of my sweetness, it pleased me to reward it in the present life in such a way that I took him up from the body in jubilation, unharmed by every pain of death, and I elevated his virgin body uncorrupted and already glorified, with special honor."²²

21. According to the legend read at Matins and also disseminated in the *Legenda Aurea*, John went down alive into his grave. He was then hidden from sight for an hour by a huge light, and when it dissipated, nothing was found in the grave except manna; see *Golden Legend*, trans. Ryan, 1:55; and further, Hamburger, *St. John the Divine*, 147 and 157, fig. 140.

22. See Mechtild, LSG I.6.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

BLESSED BENEDICT OUR FATHER: HOW BLESSED ARE THOSE WHO PROTECT THE MONASTIC LIFE

1. On the splendid feast of Benedict,¹ our most holy father, while she was devoutly intent on God during Matins for the honor and reverence of so great a father, she saw in spirit the glorious father himself, honorably standing before the shining and ever-tranquil Trinity, lovely in form and seemly in appearance. From every part of his limbs there seemed to come forth, wonderfully burgeoning, most beautiful roses, of wonderful potency and springtime loveliness, and of a unique fragrance. Whichever of his limbs was blossoming, it was like a most lovely rose garden, as each rose produced another rose from its center, and that one yet another, and thus very many came forth from one. Of these, each surpassed the other in beauty, virtue, and springtime loveliness, and one exceeded another in fragrant and fresh beauty. And thus the most holy father, all flowering and beautiful, Benedict by name and blessed by grace,² was providing the ever-worshipful Trinity and all the heavenly host with cause for wonderful and incalculable delight, and was rousing them to thanksgiving for his

1. March 21 in the pre-1970 calendar.

2. Gregory, *Dialogues* 2.Prol., PL 66:126.

great blessedness. The blooms of the roses that were flowering from each one of his limbs denoted each of the practices with which he had subjugated his flesh to the spirit, and all the virtuous acts that he had performed throughout his most holy life, and also the acts of all his followers—those who, prompted by his example and teaching, renouncing the world, and following him along the path of his moderate Rule *on the king's highway*,* have already reached the gate of the heavenly homeland and those who will reach it, from now until the end of the world. From each of these that venerable father gains a unique reward, for which the whole company of all the saints, rejoicing together in his brightness and felicity, praises the Lord without end.

*Num 21:22

2. Blessed Benedict was also carrying, as a staff, a most handsome scepter, wonderfully shining with most precious stones and wondrously decorated on both sides. As he held this in his hand, from the side facing him, the felicity of all those who were ever corrected and amended by the rigor of his Rule smiled on him from the scepter's stones: he was moved by this incalculable delight of the divine loving-kindness. From the other side, that is, the one that faced the Lord, there shone the beauty of divine justice, by which he had ever consigned to eternal punishment any of those whom he had raised up to the dignity of so great an order by generous condescension but whom he had condemned by just judgment because their faults demanded it. For the more the Lord raises someone up to a more worthy order, the more justly they are condemned if they live unworthily.

3. And when, on behalf of the community, she offered to that blessed father a complete recitation of the Psalter in his honor, he rose up with a joyful expression and offered the Lord the springtime loveliness of all his

limbs, for, as said before, he seemed to blossom for the salvation of all those who devoutly called on his paternal protection, and of all those who aspired to follow in his footsteps under the direction of his holy Rule.

4. Then while the response, “With great trust the father stood in precious death”³ and so on, was being sung, she said to him, “What reward do you gain, holy father, because you departed this world with so glorious an end?” He replied, “I declare that because I breathed my last amid words of prayer⁴ I draw breath so sweetly compared with other saints that they all take wonderful pleasure in my breathing.” Then she prayed that for the sake of the glory of his precious death he would condescend to be with any member of the community at the hour of her death without fail. The venerable father replied to her, “If anyone is eager to remind me of that reward thanks to which my Lord deigned to honor and bless me with so glorious an end, I will be with that one at the hour of death without fail. Wherever I see the harmful assaults of the Enemy raging against them, I shall certainly stand before them so that, fortified by my presence, they will safely avoid the traps of the Enemy and, endlessly blessed, seek the joys of heaven.”

3. *Grandi pater fiducia morte stetit pretiosa qui elevatis manibus caelos scandit in precibus*; “With great trust the father stood in precious death, who with uplifted hands scaled the heavens in his prayers”; response at Matins for the feast of Saint Benedict.

4. Gregory, *Dialogues* 2, ch. 37, PL 66:202, and cf. *Erectis in caelum manibus stetit et ultimum spiritum inter verba orationis efflavit*; “With hands raised heavenward he breathed his last amid words of prayer”; verse at Matins for the feast of Saint Benedict.

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